

Trends in Modern Qur'anic Interpretation

FROM 1750 UNTIL the middle of the 20th century, the occupation and decline of the Muslim world became increasingly pronounced, with the civilisation eroding under the cultural and political influence of the West penetrating ever deeper all aspects of Muslim life, socially, politically, educationally, culturally, and economically.

In an effort to stem the tide, various revivalist ideas and reform movements emerged seeking to re-establish and strengthen Islamic identity, India and Egypt being a case in point. Some of these movements sought to achieve their goals by adopting rational, intellectual and scientific approaches to interpreting Islam as a way of life. Thus new trends appeared in Islamic literature in general and *tafsīr* in particular. Examined next are aspects relating to six of these trends:

1. Intellectual
2. Scientific
3. Rhetorical
4. Philological
5. Traditional
6. Natural History

Note, J. J. G. Jansen accurately observed that no modern exegete has produced a work devoted exclusively to one particular aspect. He, however, divided the modern exegetical field into three – not six – categories: scientific, traditional, and day-today Muslim affairs.¹

1. Intellectual and Social Interpretation

Advocates of this approach aimed at waking Muslims up to the realization that the Qur'an was revealed first and foremost to guide mankind, and that it educates man on how to achieve success in this life and the Hereafter. Thus, the Qur'an is presented as the answer to all of mankind's problems and man's spiritual and worldly needs. Muslims must seek, in the Qur'an alone, the solutions to all their problems, in every sphere of their life: be it the social, economic, political, day-to-day affairs, or other areas, etc. According to this approach, Muslims must understand the Qur'an as a book of guidance to be used according to how Muslims perceive their problems within the modern world. This is contrary to relying on classical Qur'anic interpretation at all times. This perspective holds that classical interpretations, although correct for their own particular time and point in history, are not necessarily applicable to present day Muslims.²

Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Hakīm

The most popular exponent of this trend is represented by the voluminous work *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Hakīm*, popularly known as *Tafsīr al-Manār*. The work is actually a combination of the works of Shaykh Muhammad Abduh and his student, Muhammad Rashid Rida. Abduh delivered a series of lectures on *tafsīr* at al-Azhar University for a period of six years. He began lecturing from 1317 AH up to 1323 AH, the year he died, and only gave the interpretation of the first four surahs of the Qur'an.

Muhammad Rashid Rida, who was Muhammad Abduh's most outstanding student, published his own notes and his teacher's lectures in *Al-Manār Journal*. Subsequently, he compiled all of Abduh's lecture notes with some of his own comments and interpretations, which covered twelve surahs. Abduh approved surahs one to four before he died. Rashid Rida continued this effort alone after the

death of his teacher from surah 4:125 to 12:107. Rida faithfully indicated the parts for which he and his teacher were jointly responsible, marking where Abduh's words ended and his own additions began.³ The work was published in Beirut by Dār al-Fikr, in twelve volumes.⁴

Shaykh Abduh's purpose for producing the interpretation was to impress on the Muslims that the Qur'an was a religious book that essentially was revealed to guide mankind to that which would lead to success in this life and the hereafter.⁵

Furthermore, Rashid Rida explained in detail the wishes that his teacher desired to accomplish through his teaching and exegesis. He stated that there is nothing in our religion that is in conflict with present modernization – except some issues concerning usury.

Rashid Rida quotes Abduh to have stated: "I am ready to establish harmony between true Islam and whatever the Ottoman Empire might need to reach the standard of civilization achieved by the West, through the process followed by the West. I will do this through the instruction of the Qur'an and the authentic tradition of the Prophet, not through a particular school of thought in Islam."⁶

The Characteristics and Methodology of Abduh's Exegesis

In his *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, Charles Adams has excellently described the character of Abduh's commentary as follows.

He places the primary emphasis upon the guidance of the Qur'an, in a manner which agrees with the verse which describes it, and the warnings and good tidings and guidance and correction for which it was sent down, at the same time giving care to the requirements of the present day conditions with respect to acceptability of phrasing, and having regard for the capacity of different classes of readers and understanding.⁷

The following statement from Abduh provides a clear image of his exegesis: "Today, *tafsīr* is in the eyes of our people (Muslims), but before today, it was nothing more than imitation of the classical [works of] scholars, although these works may have deviated from the main purpose of the Qur'an. [However,] God will not ask [anybody] on the Day of Judgment about what was previously understood [by others]. Rather, He will ask, what did you understand about His Book? Did you ponder over the meaning of the Book that was given to you?"⁸

This is clear indication that Abduh based his exegesis on his own personal opinion in understanding the Qur'an. As a result, he rejected some established principles, or interpreted them differently from the way the majority of Muslim scholars had understood them. Abduh's new approach concerns, for example, his interpretation of Angels, Satan, and the Qur'anic account of the flight of birds.⁹

Finally, *Tafsīr al-Manār* contains a variety of interpretations and propositions ranging from the Prophet's interpretation, that of his Companions, to that of the immediate Successors and to linguistic considerations such as rhetoric, quotations from Jewish and Christian sources, and judicial issues.

The work, generally speaking, has been well received by the Muslim world. However, some scholars, such as Subhi al-Salih, Fahd Abd al-Rahman al-Rumi and others, have been critical of *Tafsīr al-Manār*,¹⁰ and these criticisms have focused mainly on those ideas that reject established Islamic principles as mentioned.

Muhammad Rashid Rida's contribution to Qur'anic exegesis consists of opinions which differ in small measure from those of his teacher, with the exception of a few concepts concerning the application of hadith, an area where Rashid Rida seemed to adhere more to classical thinking than did his teacher.

2. The Scientific Approach

Because of the scientific advances of the modern world, this approach strongly advocates that the Qur'an must be understood in the light of modern science, rather than in terms of a jurisprudential approach. One of the representative key works of this trend is *Al-Jawāhir fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Pearls from the *Tafsīr* of the Noble Qur'an) by Shaykh Jawhar Tantawi (d. 1940). Tantawi was a lecturer at Dār al-'Ulūm in Cairo, and whilst there he taught Qur'anic interpretation and also published *tafsīr* articles in a magazine called *Majallat al-Malāji' al-'Abbāsiyyah*. Subsequently, he compiled these lectures into twenty-five volumes which were then published in Cairo.¹¹

In his introductory statement, Tantawi states the reason for writing his work: "When I examined the Muslim community, I found that most of the Muslim intellectuals ignored the importance of physical science. Only a very few of them thought about it. Thus, I intended to write a Qur'anic interpretation, in the hope that it would inspire Muslims to study the physical sciences, medicine, mathematics, engineering, astronomy and other sciences." Clearly he meant to inspire Muslim scholars through his interpretation of Qur'anic verses relating to scientific propositions, so that they would follow his new approach of scientific exegesis.

Tantawi was strongly convinced that in the twentieth century Qur'anic exegesis utilising a scientific approach methodology was more important than classical interpretation. He declared that the scientific approach to Qur'anic interpretation was incumbent upon individuals whereas jurisprudence was not. Thus, he openly attacked the jurists when he stated: "The knowledge that we incorporated in Qur'anic exegesis is the knowledge that the insignificant jurists of Islam ignored. This is the time of revolution. This is the time in which realities come out"¹² (that is this is a time where we should reject classical *tafsīr* and base *tafsīr* on modern science).

He would begin each of his explanations by elucidating a particular passage of the Qur'an word by word. He would then follow this with various forms of elaboration. For example, when a verse related to a branch of modern science, he would give a detailed scientific explanation on the subject, quoting modern sciences. He also used pictures, plants and other things in *Al-Jawāhir fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* for purposes of illustration. Tantawi also used Jewish and Christian sources, such as the Gospel of Barnabas.¹³

Contemporary scholars did not warmly embrace Tantawi's methodology. Subhi al-Salih, Jansen, and others criticized it for, in their opinion, its excessive attention to scientific considerations and other ideas, so much so that the work was not considered a true exegesis.¹⁴

3. Rhetorical – Literary Rhetoric

The style of this approach is rhetorical, with much attention given to literary sociological considerations, and the objectives of the trend are the same as those of Muhammad Abduh's work. *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* by Sayyid Qutb, published in Cairo in eight volumes, is a famous example of this approach. Sayyid Qutb's educational background was Arabic literature and sociology, and he was an active member of the Muslim Brotherhood, the most powerful Islamic movement in Egypt. In his introductory statement, Sayyid Qutb states that the solution to the Muslim community and mankind's problems lies in the teaching and practicing of the Qur'an only, simply because the Qur'an was a book revealed primarily to guide mankind to achieve peace and happiness.¹⁵

In *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* Qutb first gives a general overview of the whole surah, outlining its objectives and ultimate goal. He then discusses the text phrase by phrase or verse by verse. He does not explain word by word as many classical works have done. If any hadith of the Prophet concerning the meaning of a particular verse existed Qutb

would mention it, as well as the occasions of the revelation. At the end a brief summary of the surah would usually be provided, pointing out the relationship between that surah and the next.

Although the dominant style of *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* is rhetorical, Qutb invariably refers his readers to Islamic legal literature, stating that juristic matters are not the purpose of his *tafsīr*. Interestingly enough, he gives theological arguments very little attention.

Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān has been overwhelmingly acclaimed by Muslims worldwide simply because it focuses on the social problems experienced by Muslims of his time, and as Muhammad Ayyub has rightly pointed out the work has had a wide reception in both Sunni and Shia communities.¹⁶

4. Philological Interpretation and Historical Commentary

This approach advocates that the Qur'an must be understood through the Arabic language simply because it has been revealed in Arabic. According to this approach, one must know the chronological order of the Qur'an and the circumstances of time and place surrounding the revelation of the text. Whilst no complete work of *tafsīr* exists which represents this trend, there is however, one incomplete work which serves this purpose. Entitled, *Tafsīr al-Bayān li al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* it was written by Aishah bint Abd al-Rahman al-Shati, best known best as Bint al-Shati.

The concept of this trend was initiated by Amin al-Khuli (d. 1967), who never published a Qur'anic commentary, although he taught Qur'anic interpretation at *Al-Jāmi'ah al-Miṣriyyah* (the Egyptian University) in Giza. For Amin al-Khuli, the ideal *tafsīr* commentary should be divided in two parts. The first providing a study of the background of the Qur'an, the history of its genesis, Arab society at the time of the revelation, Arabic language, etc among other topics. The second providing commentary and exegesis on the verses of the Qur'an in the light of preliminary studies.¹⁷

Bint al-Shati, a student of Amin al-Khuli who became his wife later, was exposed to this method by her husband and became very enthusiastic concerning it. She began to advocate it in 1964 giving many lectures on the subject matter.¹⁸ More interestingly, she summarized the principles of the trends as she expanded or articulated her husband's work *Manhaj Tajdid* under the following four headings:

- 1) Thematic: The basis of the method is the collection of all surahs and verses of the topics to be studied.
- 2) Contextual understanding: To understand a particular Qur'anic notion, in context, verses on it are placed in the chronological order of their revelation so that the circumstances of time and place may be known. Traditional reports on the "occasions of revelations" are taken into consideration only as far as those occasions are contextual circumstances and associated with the revelation of a particular verse. They are not its purpose or its cause sine qua non. From this perspective, the significance lies in the generality of words, not the specificity of the occasion.
- 3) Linguistic understanding: To understand the meanings of words – since Arabic is the language of the Qur'an – the original linguistic meaning is sought which gives the sense of feeling for the Arabic word in its various material and figurative uses. The Qur'anic meaning is then noted by collecting all forms of the word in the Qur'an and studying their particular context in specific verses and surahs and their general context in the Qur'an as a whole.
- 4) Understanding subtleties of expression: To do this both the letter and the spirit of a particular text in its Qur'anic setting are considered. Then statements of exegetes are examined in relation to the text studied, and only what agrees with the text is accepted. To be avoided are all sectarian interpretations and all instructive *Iisrā'iliyyāt* (Jewish-Christian materials) forced on *tafsīr* literature. In like manner, grammatical and rhetorical usage in the Qur'an is to be considered the criterion by which the rules of grammarians

and rhetoricians are judged, not vice versa, since most of these were people for whom Arabic was not their mother tongue.¹⁹

As far as Bint al-Shati's methodology and some of her important findings and details are concerned, see Muhammad Sharif and Boullata.²⁰ Bint al-Shati's *tafsīr* has been described by Manna al-Qattan as an acceptable effort. However, he expresses some concern over the deficiency of this method with regard to certain aspects of the Qur'anic sciences, including the miracles associated with the Qur'anic laws and basic principles. Muhammad Sharif also held reservations similar to those of al-Qattan.²¹

5. The Traditional Approach

This approach relies heavily on classical *tafsīr* and literature, but it also addresses some issues of modern times. Representatives of the trend include Shaykh Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866-1914) and his work *Maḥāsīn al-Ta'wīl* and Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashur, author of the famous *Al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr*. Discussion focuses on the latter.

Al-Sheikh Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashur was a contemporary Tunisian scholar (d. 1960), and one of the most outstanding Muslim scholars of the 20th century. He was a competent *uṣūlī* (legal theorist), a *mufasssīr*, a judge and the *Muftī* of Tunisia. *Al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, his famous *tafsīr* commentary, was originally published under the title *Tahrīr al-Ma'nā al-Sadīd wa Tanwīr al-ʿAql al-Jadīd min al-Tafsīr al-Majīd* but later shortened by him to *Al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr min al-Tafsīr*.

The work is highly comprehensive in nature and typically classical in approach. It can be fairly described as an "encyclopedia." Ibn Ashur claimed his *tafsīr* to contain the best found in *tafsīr* literature, as well as the best found in *tafsīr* books, "*Fa fīh aḥsan māfī al-tafāsīr wa fīh aḥsan min māfī al-tafāsīr*," (that is in his book one finds the best explanation

of *tafsīr*, and also in his book one finds the best information among all other books of *tafsīr*).

Ibn Ashur in his words had long dreamt of producing a *tafsīr* of the Qur'an with a view to elucidating its subtlety and general legislation (*al-Tashrī'*), but given the enormous difficulty of the task at hand hesitated, remaining undecided, until one day when given the position of a judge, and its attendant responsibilities, he gave up all hope. After serving the court for a while, he became *mufī* of Tunisia which meant that he now had the authority to issue fatwas (Islamic legal opinion). This meant that at long last he could actually start working on his own Qur'anic commentary and realize the dream he had cherished for so long. In the now famous *tafsīr* which resulted Ibn Ashur claims to have included subtleties which no one before him had mentioned. In this respect, he further indicates that he conducted ground-breaking research, on the basis of new sources, resulting in the recording of new findings, which Allah had blessed him with, and which no exegete prior to him had ever mentioned, based that is on the sources available to him. By this he means that others may also have discovered them but not according to the sources available.

In regard to the *tafsīr* itself, according to Ibn Ashur he focused on aspects of Qur'anic miracles, rhetorical subtlety, and *Asālīb al-Isti'māl* (literally, 'usage styles'), an Arabic phrase used to refer to the various Qur'anic styles, the coherence or relationship between Qur'anic verses, and elaboration on the meaning of Qur'anic terms and their exact dialectical usage not mentioned by many Arabic lexicons.

In terms of the *tafsīr's* methodology before discussing any surah Ibn Ashur begins by mentioning its name. If the Prophet named the surah, he mentions the corresponding hadith. If a Companion, then he mentions both the corresponding hadith and the names of the *Ṣahābī*, or *Ṣaḥābah*. If the surah has other names, he mentions these and explains why this particular name was chosen. Secondly, he states to which of the two phases (Makkan or Madinan) the surah belongs. Thirdly, he indicates the position of the surah in terms of the

chronological order of the revelation. Fourthly, he mentions the total number of verses which the surah contains. Lastly, he explains the purpose and objectives of the surah.

The work in addition cites numerous hadith, references to *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions the circumstances of revelation), *tafsīr* statements by the Companions and the Successors, names of various exegetes as well as *mufasssīrūn*, and an intensive and sustained discussion on *balāghah* (rhetoric), philological analysis, grammar, *munāsabāt bayn al-āyāt* (relationships between the verses), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) etc.

6. Natural History

This trend is described by Muhammad al-Dhahabi (1915-1977) as one that is preferred or used by renegades, while Jansen terms it a natural history approach. Al-Dhahabi, as a Muslim, was concerned with the contents of *tafsīr* works, while Jansen rather looked at them from a Western scholar's viewpoint.²² The trend contends that all *tafsīr* literature is useless. It even rejects some of the established principles of the Qur'an and Hadith as well as the miracles of the prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Solomon and so on, claiming to be a new method of understanding the Qur'an. One of its outstanding exponents is Muhammad Abu Zayd, who penned the controversial *Al-Hidāyah wa al-ʿIrfān*, a work confiscated by al-Azhar University who declared its author an apostate and issued a fatwa rejecting its contents.²³